

‘It’s the engineering spirit that is one of the great characteristics of British enterprise in this region’

How many international businessmen have taxi drivers cross the street to shake them by the hand? It’s a question Sandra Fraser is still pondering after meeting Prodrive chairman and chief executive David Richards – the man who bought Aston Martin back from the Americans. Photography by Mark Fairhurst

DRIVING to Banbury I’m passed by two Aston Martin cars on the M40. That’s not to say they’re common – only 7000 were made last year and there’s an international waiting list even if you have the available cash to order one – but with its double-winged badge, predator-like lines and air of distinction, an Aston Martin gets noticed. Blame Ian Fleming and James Bond, blame the exciting ejector seat on the Corgi model you played with as a kid, but whatever it is that creates Britons’ admiration for Aston Martin, it has penetrated David Richards, too.

In 1986, David chose Banbury as the headquarters for his business, Prodrive, but I’m not sure anyone’s ever crossed a street in the town and thanked him for doing so, though he was awarded a CBE in 2005.

“There’s always something exciting going on here – there’s never a dull moment,” says David, sitting at his gleaming Dakota wing desk, the M40 in his sightline, a shark, made of significant Formula 1 car parts, lurking menacingly behind him.

A tour shows that Prodrive is very successful – there are display cabinets full of motor-racing trophies alongside a collection of world-beating cars. Through another door the hush-hush models with un-

PRODRIVE FACTS:

- The company was founded in 1984 by David Richards and Ian Parry. It moved to its Banbury site in 1986.
- Prodrive has annual sales of more than £120 million and employs around 1,000 staff in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia-Pacific.
- The company has won six World Rally titles with Subaru; five British Touring Car Championships with BMW, Alfa Romeo and Ford; and the GTS class at Le Mans with a Ferrari.
- Prodrive signs a deal with Aston Martin to design, develop and run a GT version of its DB9 car.
- In 2006 the company was confirmed as the 12th team in the 2008 Formula One World Championship.

photographable elements are being built – every tweak and innovation an attempt to gain advantage on their rivals. Next year Prodrive will return to the Formula 1 fold, though production will have to move to a purpose-built facility over the border in Warwickshire because the Banbury site simply has no more space for expansion. The staff of about 450 – notably, men on the engineering side, women on the office side – it’s a division David’s happy to see

change, provided the right recruits walk through the door – clearly get a buzz from their jobs.

But for now, the buzz is all about David, Aston Martin and his heroic buy-out. He’s effected it in a personal capacity with an international financial consortium, thus ending almost twenty years of Ford Motor Company control – though company still holds a stake. Suddenly, the man who was World Rally champion in 1981 and has been running a multi-million pound international company from Oxfordshire, is worth extra column inches now he’s non-executive chairman of Aston Martin. But image apart – and David has the entrepreneur’s image down to a tee with his unshaven face, expensive suit, funky glasses, aviator watch and tan brogues – there’s little clue to how a boy from a Welsh farm ended up running such a hugely successful company. I have to make him stop talking business to get him to talk about his home-life on the Oxfordshire-Warwickshire border.

He is prepared to reveal that watching a race when he was 15 sparked his interest in rally driving and that the road from there to here has been paved with a mix of passion, good luck and determination, ▶

Oxfordshire character

with Sandra Fraser



tempered with a head-over-heart approach to management.

At 16, he bought his first car, a bug-eyed Austin Healey Sprite that he rescued as a wreck from a barn, stripped down and rebuilt, he passed his driving test on his seventeenth birthday and was taking his pilot's licence one month later, thanks to sponsorship from the RAF. But he was savvy enough, even then, to realise that he wasn't going to take too well to a career in the forces.

"I realised I was too much of a free spirit to join the RAF," he says. His father persuaded him to go into accountancy instead.

"It was only a means to an end, never an end in itself," he points out quickly, when I question the amount of free spirit in accountancy.

He met his wife, Karen, when both were teenagers and if there's a secret to this success story, he's not revealing it, but there are tears in his eyes when he's talking about her. The narrow, worn wedding ring on his left hand is testament to a long marriage.

So what did Karen think of his plans to put a consortium together to buy out Ford and take over Aston Martin?

"I don't think there's a lot I can shock her with, these days. She's used to fairly extreme ideas," he says. "Half the strength in what we've achieved is because we work as a team. She's a big supporter of what I do."

Karen does have a fiercely competitive nature of her own, he says, proudly – which shows up when they have a showdown on the tennis court. She also refused, on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, to get into a Sprite he'd sourced, had rebuilt and re-sprayed in Bahama yellow to remind her of their early dates. But any idea that they have garages full of desirable vehicles is pretty wide of the mark, it seems. The accountant side of David kicks in.

"I've had old cars – including most of the Aston Martins... the reality in life with these old cars – I know friends of mine who have lots and lots of them – is that you only have one or two that you drive – you have your favourites."

He goes on to tell a tale of his DB5 – exactly like the iconic Silver Birch model used in the James Bond film.

"I was at a 50th birthday party and a chap who knew me said he'd always wanted one of these cars and my wife said, 'Well David's got one – David you should sell it to him.' And I said, 'No, I love that car, why would I do that?' 'Well you never drive it,' 'Of course I drive it' – I went back and I happened to check the MOT certificates on it and it had done 30 miles in two years – so I rang the guy and said, if you still want it you can have it – so I sold it to him."

Karen prefers her Frazer Nash sports car, a wacky little two-seater that she takes her 83-year-old mother shopping in. The couple have a Range Rover Sport and David drives



ASTON MARTIN FACTS:

- The company was founded in 1914 by Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford. The name Aston Martin was inspired by a success at the Aston Clinton hill climb.
- In 1928 the company first entered the Le Mans 24-hour race – in 1952 Aston Martin took 1st, 2nd and 3rd places in the Le Mans 3-litre class.
- The classic DB5 was first produced in 1963, the following year it appeared with James Bond in Goldfinger.

DAVID RICHARDS FACTS:

- Born June 3 1952, he went to a comprehensive school in north Wales. He is married to Karen and has three children, aged 13 to 28.
- After completing his studying he became a professional rally co-driver and won the World Rally Championship in 1981.
- He is chairman and chief executive of Prodrive and non-executive chairman of Aston Martin.
- In the 2005 New Years' honours, he was made a Commander of the British Empire, CBE, for his services to motorsport.

a DB6 Volante. He flies helicopters and planes when he needs to get around rapidly and though he's wary of sounding hypocritical, he tries to drive rather than fly where possible. Which brings us to another side of this businessman.

"I'm very socially aware of my responsibilities to the people that we employ and to the local community as well," he says.

Karen and David champion Oxford Children's Hospital appeal and Prodrive has an Open Day in July to support it.

There are a number of Prodrive projects in development as a spin-off from racing car technology – a hydrogen-powered motorbike and an efficient domestic energy programme. The company has also manufactured composite panels for a British satellite. He sees these not only as a means of providing the company with greater stability and growth away from the motor racing industry but also as a means of extending his workers' minds and abilities.

"The talents that we cultivate inside the organisation here and that engineering spirit, to my mind, is one of the great characteristics of British enterprise in this region," he says.

So steering him back away from business – what makes David himself tick? He claims not to be able to answer that question – though he admits to seeing elements of himself in his elder son, Jamie, who, like his dad, found an enterprising way of buying a scrap car and driving it despite a shortfall of

cash (David refused to make up the difference required though it was a very small drop in his financial ocean). His photographer daughter, Lara, is 28, and the family baby, Harry, who is 13, is at the Dragon School in Oxford, and will go to Radley College shortly.

"I've been very fortunate in my life," says David. "I've never been put in a box, I've somehow always managed to work for myself from day one. Working in a regimented, structured way is not my style of doing things. I'm very much a creative, lateral thinker, I'm always looking at ideas and looking at different ways of doing things, never accepting that convention is the right solution."

If he has any regrets it's that he's never focussed on one particular activity and seen it through to its natural conclusion.

"Maybe Aston Martin is the one activity that will get more of my attention and I will learn to focus on it in a bit more depth," he says, assuring me that Aston Martin will make a profit in the future, a rare feat in the past.

"It's a company with an extraordinary heritage. The thing that has struck me more recently, since we've bought the company, is people have this emotion and passion for the car that is unimaginable. People come up in the street, a taxi driver will walk across and shake my hand or somebody who I would never have imagined would know about me will come over to me and say, 'I am so, so pleased, so proud of what you've done,' – so there are a lot of people out there who share my enthusiasm and that's encouraging in itself."

Prodrive's open day takes place on July 14 and 15 to raise money for Oxford Children's Hospital. Visitors will be able to see how the company designs and builds Subaru World Rally Cars (WRC), as well as the Aston Martin DBR9 sports cars, the WRC engines, gearboxes and electrical systems and how the hundreds of complex parts for each car are manufactured. There will be a display by the Aston Martin Racing Team, fresh from Le Mans, and, once again, the Subaru World Rally Team will set up its service park in the grounds. Race and rally cars from Prodrive's 20 years in motorsport will be on display, including Colin McRae's and Richard Burns's Imprezas; Porsche 911 SC RS and MG 6R4 group B rally cars; James Thompson's 1998 Honda Accord Super Touring Car; Alain Menu's BTCC-winning Ford Mondeo and Jenson Button's 2004 F1 car.

There will also be a range of other road car projects Prodrive has worked on. Tickets are limited and sold on a first come, first served basis, price: adults, £12, children, £6, under 5s free. ■

For more information visit www.prodrive.co.uk, or write to: Prodrive, Banbury, Oxon, OX16 3ER. Tel: 01295 273355.

